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SUBJECT: SIXTH ROUND IN SAADA: WHERE'S THE TIPPING POINT?

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Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The threat of a sixth round of fighting between the al-Houthi rebels and government forces in Saada looms large. Potential flashpoints include the issue of prisoners, tribal warfare in the northern governorates and the grim humanitarian situation. The constant drumbeat of violent clashes in Saada and al-Jawf over the last two months suggests a resumption of hostilities that is likely to elicit intensified military action from a reluctant ROYG this spring. END SUMMARY.

FLASHPOINT: PRISONERS

¶2. (C) The issue of prisoners has persisted as a point of contention between the ROYG and the Houthis since President Saleh declared an end to the fifth round of fighting in July ¶2008. In the intervening eight months, the Houthis have released a number of police officers held in Saada, ostensibly as a "show of good faith." The ROYG, which has been relatively slow to release prisoners held in connection with the conflict, released 11 prisoners on March 26, according to press reports, including high-profile detainee Abdulkarim al-Houthi, held since 2006. But Ali al-Dalaيمي, a Zaydi human rights activist, told PolOff in February that 36 prisoners remain in jail in Sana'a and 13 in Hajja in connection with the Houthi conflict, some of whom have been incarcerated for two years without formal charges or trials. At least 360 Zaydi and Hashemite prisoners have disappeared completely since the 2004 start of the conflict, according to Hassan Zayd, secretary general of the Zaydi-affiliated al-Haq party. Human-rights activists claim that some prisoners have been detained due to their Zaydi or Hashemite backgrounds, which they share with the Houthi rebels, without any connection to the violent rebellion in Saada.

FLASHPOINT: TRIBAL CONFLICT

¶3. (C) In the nearly five years of on-again, off-again fighting between the ROYG and Houthi's "Believing Youth" rebels, tribes and civilians in Yemen's northwest region have been increasingly forced to choose sides. The ROYG and the Houthis have competed for local support through provision of security and services, as well as intimidation. For example, the Houthis require all returning IDPs to sign a loyalty pledge, according to the UNHCR (reftel). As the region has become increasingly polarized, small-scale conflicts between tribal groups threaten to become a larger proxy war between the ROYG and the Houthis. This polarization has expanded beyond Saada into al-Jawf, where many of the already anti-government tribes have sided with the Houthis against the ROYG, according to Majid al-Fahd, executive director of a local democracy NGO and a native of Saada. Fahd told PolOff on March 23 that Hashid and Dhu Mohammed tribes in al-Jawf,

once early backers of the Yemeni republic, have increasingly aligned themselves with the Houthis. "Every day, there is killing (in al-Jawf)," Fahd said. March media reports indicated at least six instances of fighting between government forces and Houthi supporters, each backed by armed tribesmen, totaling at least - and likely more than - eight Houthi and 10 government casualties and an unspecified number of injuries.

FLASHPOINT: HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

¶4. (C) The poor humanitarian situation in Saada has remained largely unchanged since last December, despite ROYG promises of aid. On March 23, the Saada Reconstruction Fund approved a FY 2009 budget of approximately \$53.5M for the reconstruction of houses, farms and public buildings. (Note: The ROYG's entire budget for 2009 is \$9.8B. End Note.) The ROYG, however, has paid out only a small percentage of reconstruction funds promised since last July, and as Islah official Raji Badi told PolOff on March 24, "This is just numbers, there is nothing on the ground, nothing concrete." The ROYG's lack of attention to the humanitarian front has progressively lost it local support and increased the relative popularity of the Houthis. Al-Dalaimi and Zayd both said that the Houthi movement has grown from about 300 supporters several years ago to "hundreds of thousands" of followers in Saada and al-Jawf today, largely because of pragmatic rather than ideological concerns. The Houthis have garnered popular support by positioning themselves as the only provider of badly needed food and basic services. On March 22, Houthi supporters seized Red Crescent trucks carrying food aid, stating that the relief organization was distributing the food in a manner biased towards the government side, according to local media. The ROYG continues to ignore the public relations cost of military tactics that target civilian populations. On March 28, Abdulmalik al-Houthi accused the ROYG of conducting airstrikes on the Saada village of Maran, killing eight, among them women and children, although there has been no independent corroboration of this allegation.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) The frequency and severity of clashes in Saada has steadily increased during 2009. The question remains what, if anything, will prove the tipping point for the ROYG to reengage militarily with the Houthi rebels in a sustained manner. Clearly, it is not in the struggling ROYG's interest to renew full-scale hostilities in Saada - and possibly al-Jawf. A prolonged military campaign in Saada would drain limited military resources and distract President Saleh from major crises with al-Qaeda, the economy and the South. However, an increase in hostilities on the side of the Houthis might force Saleh's hand. In a time when central control is under increasing challenge across Yemen, the President might feel he has no choice but to attempt to reassert his waning authority in Yemen's rebellious northwest. END COMMENT.

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